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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters that encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist undergoes profound change. A close study of character development maps the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief in each character. Still, the tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next, affecting the drama and the plot.

Much of the older generation in *The Joy Luck Club* has undergone a transformation before they even come to America. Suyuan Woo has had to abandon two daughters during the war with Japan, a loss she never stops mourning. Lindo Jong concocts a clever story to extricate herself from an arranged and unhappy marriage. An-mei Hsu's mother has committed suicide, thereby allowing her daughter to learn how to speak for herself. They all attempt to redeem their lives through their daughters in America. We see most of the characters advance from childhood to adulthood, each trying to incorporate the wisdom and experience of her mother. No character is more thoroughly changed than June Woo, who learns a lesson in Chinese humility—accepting the gift of her mother's jade necklace—and, by novel's end, undertakes a journey to China to find the missing part of her mother's story.

Discussion Activities

Group students in pairs. Assign a mother-daughter duo to each pair. One student will role-play the mother and the other student will role-play the daughter. For discussion, students should review the stories that “they” have told in the novel. Pairs should discuss their characters primary motivations, strengths, and weaknesses. Have they undergone change? In what way? Do they have characteristics they are unable to change? What are they and why? Report findings to the class.

Writing Exercise

In “American Translation,” we encounter the daughters as adults. Write an argument, supported by quotes, to defend the following statement: Each daughter struggles to find balance between Chinese heritage and American values through marriage and professional careers.

Homework

Have students read the next two chapters (pp. 213-252). Students should come to class with what they perceive to be the two most important turning points thus far in the novel.